

## ABSTRACT

### SOCIAL WORK

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## THE OUTCOME OF JUVENILE COURT INTERVENTION ON TRUANCY AMONG MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS

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This study investigated the outcome of juvenile court intervention on truancy among middle school students. Truancy, the unauthorized non-attendance of school, has been a major problem for many schools across the United States and abroad. Research supports that truancy can be linked to substance use, low academic achievement, poor school performance and violence (Cho, Hallfors, Iriani, Khatapoush, & Saxe, 2002). These factors indicate the desperate need for changes in laws and programs that affect truancy and many states have begun developing such programs. The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of juvenile court intervention on truancy among middle school students.

The sample population was taken from Joseph Emerson Brown Middle School, (grades 6 – 8) located in Atlanta, Georgia and consisted of 30 student attendance records from the 2002 – 2003 and 2003 – 2004 school years. These students had been petitioned to juvenile court for truancy. Student attendance records prior to court intervention were compared with attendance records following court intervention, and a demographic questionnaire was developed and utilized.

The data was analyzed using the One Sample T-test and descriptive statistics. A pre and posttest model was also used to determine the change in truancy. It was hypothesized that juvenile court intervention, the independent variable, would decrease truancy, the dependent variable, among middle school students ages 11 – 13.

Findings from this study inferred that juvenile court intervention does not reduce truancy rates among students petitioned to appear in court. Because the study was not longitudinal, the researcher was unable to determine the long-term effects of juvenile court intervention on truancy. This study will aid education administrators in deciding whether to continue to utilize juvenile court as an intervention for truant students or to seek other measures to reduce absenteeism.

THE OUTCOME OF JUVENILE COURT INTERVENTION ON TRUANCY  
AMONG MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the background of the problem, the statement of the problem, significance of the study and the purpose of this study.

Schools have been experiencing significant problems related to students' attendance over a considerable period of time. Therefore, it has proven to be necessary to determine which approaches are effective in tackling truancy. This study will define truancy, discuss interventions that have been utilized to combat truancy and focus on the juvenile court system as the primary intervention.

Truancy has several definitions, depending on the state and school the definition could be very different. For example, some schools consider simple truancy an absence for part or all of a school day for which a student's parent or guardian has not provided a valid excuse, while others consider a student with five or more days absent in a semester a habitual truant (Truancy Reduction Efforts, 2000). Truancy is an age-old phenomenon that still plagues communities today. In 1980, a national survey reported at least 800,000 students in the United Kingdom were absent from school without a valid excuse (Gullatt, et al.,1997). In 1993, a similar survey was conducted in the United States by the National Association of Education and suggested that at least half a million children were truant everyday (Webb, 1993).

Students are absent from school for a number of reasons ranging from personal illness, family crisis, intentional “skipping” to caring for a younger sibling or ailing parent. The problem with these absences is that they are not valid or excused by a parent or guardian. Previously, school officials have engaged many tactics to combat this type of truancy including suspending the students’ driver’s licenses and taking them home to their parents when found wandering the streets, however truancy has continued to increase. On August 19, 1916, the Compulsory Attendance Law was created to hold parents responsible when their children do not attend school. This law grants schools the option of filing a petition in juvenile court against a parent and student with excessive unexcused absences.

Truancy is an aged problem in the United States dating as far back as the 1800’s. In the early 1800’s, education was only available to those who could pay and even then students were truant (Victorian Events, 2002). The Foster Education Act of 1870 sought to ensure that students attended school regularly. It stipulated that no children under ten years old could be employed and that parents had a statutory obligation to ensure their children’s attendance (Carlen, Gleeson, & Wardhaugh, 1992). Following this act was the Elementary Education Act of 1876, which structured procedures for legally enforcing school attendance by placing truants in detention or into institutions (Harvey, 2003). This act also set up school attendance committees to enforce more regular attendance. In 1880 the Education Act made school attendance to the age of ten compulsory, at this time a child could leave school provided that their attendance had been satisfactory.

By the 1900’s, truancy continued to be a dilemma and previous acts were reinforced by Rab Butler’s Education Act of 1944 (Fifty Modern Thinkers, 2003). This

act attempted to create structure for the education system by raising the schools leave age to fifteen. It further stated that schooling should be free, cater to the different academic levels and aptitudes of children and should be the sole responsibility of the parents. Bell, Rosen and Dynlacht (1994) reported that of the 88% of middle school students on the registers that only 72% were in average daily attendance. They also suggested that these students were truant and had an increased risk to be involved in substance abuse, gang activities, burglary and vandalism.

In the twenty first century, school systems are still faced with the fact that each day hundreds of thousands of students are missing from their classrooms without valid excuses. It has been estimated that in New York City alone 150,000 of 1 million public school students are absent on a typical school day. Although the exact number is unknown, many of these absences were the result of truancy (Gary, 1996).

### Statement of the Problem

Truancy is a serious crisis affecting countless schools throughout the United States. It has been labeled one of the top ten major problems in America's schools soaring as high as 30% in some cities (Gullatt & Lemoine, 1997). According to Gullatt and Lemoine, 10% to 19% of school children are truant on any given day and truancy rates increase 33% on any given Monday. If these students are not attending school, they are missing pertinent educational lessons, which will make it difficult for them to excel academically. Baker, Sigmon, Nady, and Nugent stated that school officials and lawmakers have tried several tactics, including taking away student's drivers license, to combat truancy without any success. They also note that an emphasis should be placed

on the Compulsory Attendance Law, which would hold the student and parent responsible for excessive absences. Juvenile court intervention, which is the result of a court petition being filed due to noncompliance with compulsory attendance laws, will be addressed in this paper. Given these statistics and the long history of truancy that is pervasive in middle school and does not seem to be improving, it is imperative to determine if juvenile court intervention is successful in combating the issue.

### Significance of the Study

This study was developed to better understand and measure how Juvenile Court intervention affects truancy among middle school students. The focus is on students who do not comply with the Compulsory Attendance Laws as set forth by the state of Georgia and are consequently petitioned to court for their behavior.

This study is significant because research has shown a 23% decrease in unexcused absences in court-referred cases (Fantuzzo, J., Grim, S. M., & Hazan, H., 2001). Truancy is seen as a major predictor for delinquent behaviors and is often linked to substance use, low academic achievement, poor school performance and violence (Cho et al., 2002). It is significant to the field of education because high absences increases the likelihood that the student will fall behind their peers academically which may lead to low self-esteem and put the student at a higher risk for dropping out of school. As well, low average daily attendance upsets school budgets because financial aid supplied by the state is determined by these attendance rates and it is difficult to improve schools with reduced funding. In addition, regular attendance is associated with higher test scores, which the community often views as reputable criterion for “good” schools.

This study is significant to the field of school social work because school social workers make the first contact with the family, and must determine the appropriate intervention when a student has excessive absences. Having knowledge about the effectiveness of juvenile court intervention before filing a petition would be beneficial for the student and the social worker. If effective, this intervention may aid in the development of more productive citizens. The researcher is very passionate about students graduating from high school and is devoted to discovering ways to help ensure that they achieve this goal.

### Purpose

This study has a twofold purpose: to examine the outcome of Juvenile Court intervention on truancy among middle school students; and to determine if court intervention will improve the attendance of excessively truant students. In this study, truancy is defined as “any absence for part or all of a school day of which a pupil’s parent or guardian has not provided a valid excuse” (Truancy Reduction Efforts: A Best Practice Review, 2000, p. 13).

Chapter II of this study provides a review of relevant empirical research and its limitations. Chapter III describes the methodology used to conduct the study, including the research design, site, setting and sample, data collection, instrumentation and data analysis. The fourth chapter presents the results of the study and utilizes graphs as visuals. Chapter V brings the findings to a conclusion while relating back to the literature. Also, limitations of the study are discussed. The final chapter covers implications of the study’s findings as they relate to social work practice.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The dilemma of truancy continues to exist in numerous schools throughout America. It affects students, teachers, families and their communities. Research is needed to determine which truancy intervention programs are effective, and which ones are ineffective for middle school students.

This chapter provides a review of the relevant empirical studies in the area of truancy. It examines truancy as it relates specifically to Georgia and takes a look at various interventions that have been utilized. This chapter also contains limitations of the literature, the conceptual framework and the researched hypothesis can be found in this chapter. The topic of this paper is truancy and court intervention and this area will be discussed lastly in this section.

#### Truancy

For the purpose of this paper, truancy is defined as the failure of students to adhere to attendance codes and the failure to attend school regularly, without parental consent (Williams, 2002). The definition of truancy varies from state to state often making it difficult to generalize the findings.

Cutting class and truancy are not generally thought of as synonymous and researchers have found that approximately 40% of extreme truancy cases in Chicago

occur due to cutting class (Walls, 2003). In addition, truants are often in and around school and their tardiness may also account for truancy, which leads to two types of truants, those who cut class and those who miss full days. According to Fantuzzo et al. (2001), students with the highest truancy rates exhibit trends of low academic achievement, which increases the likelihood that they may become school dropouts. A study conducted in 2000 in Minneapolis found that students who were in class 95% of the time were twice as likely to pass state language-arts tests than students with attendance rates of 85% (Raising School Attendance, 2002).

The U.S. Department of Education states that truancy is the most powerful predictor of juvenile delinquent behavior and drug use. The department recognizes the correlation by stating:

Truancy conceptually provides a good indicator of low school attachment and of bonding with deviant peers and therefore, likely links to drug use. Existing evidence indicates adolescents who engage in truancy also are more likely to use substances. Truancy has been associated with use of cigarettes, alcohol, marijuana, inhalants and illegal hard drugs. Frequent truants typically show little connection with school, exhibit low academic motivation and consequently show poor school performance (Cho et al., 2002).

### Truancy in Georgia

Georgia, like many other states, is greatly affected by the abundance of truant students throughout its' school systems. Beverly Hall, Superintendent of Atlanta Public Schools, stated that hundreds of schools in 2003 failed a federal improvement check because too many kids were absent from school (Atlanta Public Schools, 2003). This affects school state funding, national test scores and the schools reputation that will be

projected into the community. Hall goes on to say that several schools had high-test scores but flunked because students were not in class to take the tests (Wyatt, 2003).

The Georgia Compulsory School Attendance Law (GCSA) governs students and parents and mandates attendance. It states the following:

Every parent, guardian or other person residing within the state having control or charge of any child or children between their sixth and sixteenth birthdays shall enroll and send such child or children to a public school, a private school or a home study program that meets the requirements for a public school, a private school or a home study program; and such child shall be responsible for enrolling in and attending a public school, a private school or home study program... unless the child's failure to enroll and attend is caused by the child's parent, guardian or other person in which case the parent, guardian or other person alone shall be responsible (Georgia General Assembly 2003-2004).

Schools give multiple warnings to parents and students concerning attendance, however some students still fail to improve their attendance habits. For this reason, the GCSA also indicates consequences for violation in code section 20-2-690.1 as stated below:

Any parent or guardian who fails to enroll and send his/her child to one of the three alternative educational programs specified above shall, upon conviction, be guilty of a misdemeanor. These individuals will be subject to a fine not to exceed \$100.00 or imprisonment not to exceed 30 days or both, at the discretion of the court having jurisdiction. Each day's absence from school in violation of the CODE SECTION shall constitute a separate offense (Georgia General Assembly 2003-2004).

Governor Perdue of Georgia (2004) submitted new legislation to improve education in Georgia. Senate Bill 428 relates to school discipline and specific sections of the Bill corresponds particularly with truancy. The Bill states the following:

Students with ten or more unexcused absences in any semester will not be permitted to have a driver's license or learner's permit until they resume regular school studies. Students who have been suspended from school, for any reason, for more than ten cumulative



days, will have their driver's licenses suspended and they will not be permitted to regain their license or permit until six months later (Georgia General Assembly 2003-2004).

CODE SECTION 20-2-154.1 of senate Bill 428 states that:

Any parent, guardian, or other person residing in the state who has control or charge of a child or children and who shall violate this Code section shall be guilty of a misdemeanor and, upon conviction thereof, shall be subject to a fine not less than twenty-five dollars and not greater than one hundred dollars, imprisonment not to exceed 30 days, community services or any combination of such penalties, at the discretion of the court having jurisdiction. Each day's absence from school in violation of this part after the child's school systems notifies the parent, guardian, or other person who has control or charge of a child shall constitute a separate offense. After two reasonable attempts to notify the parent, guardian, or other person who has control or charge of the child of the unexcused absences without a response, the school system shall send a notice by certified mail with return receipt requested. Public schools shall provide to parents, guardians, or other person having control or charge of each child enrolled in public school a written summary of possible consequences and penalties for failing to comply with compulsory attendance under this CODE SECTION for children and their parents, guardians, or other persons having control or charge of children. The parents, guardians, or other person who have control or charge of a child or children shall sign a statement indicating receipt of such written statement of possible consequences and penalties: children who are age ten years or older by September 1 shall sign a statement indicating receipt of such written statement of possible consequences and penalties. After two reasonable attempts by the school to secure such signature, the school shall be considered to be in compliance with this subsection (Georgia General Assembly 2003-2004).

The state of Georgia is working in anticipation that the crisis of truancy will be one that is well maintained and its rates will be kept at a minimal level.

#### Interventions

Early prevention programs focus on elementary school students and seek to educate parents and children about the importance of continued education while aiming to address the issues underlying truancy (Bell, A., Rosen, L., Dynlacht, D., 2002). An

example of an early prevention program is the Truancy Prevention Through Mediation Program that was being used in several school districts throughout Ohio. This particular article focused on one district in the northern part of the state. Students in this school district took home a letter detailing the attendance policy that was to be signed by a parent and returned during the first week of school. After two or three absences a second letter was sent to parents indicating the number of days their children missed and inviting the parent to participate in a mediation session (Bell et. al 2002). This confidential session included the parent, student's teacher, school social worker, principal and student if the student was above the age of 11. The goal was to reach a mutual and voluntary agreement by all parties in the best interest of the student. If the mediation agreement was violated, the family could be referred to court for intervention and the court date would be scheduled within one month.

During the 2000-2001 school year schools in this district witnessed a significant reduction in the number absences (Bell et. al., 2002). In Kindergarten, the average number of absences fell from 15 to 4 after mediation and first grade absences fell from 13 to 2 following mediation (Bell et. al. 2002). Due to its success, the program is being expanded to other states.

Some states are using Truancy Intervention Programs (TIP) that offer alternatives to referring truant students directly to the court system. These programs were commonly implemented at the middle and high school level and aimed to intervene at the emerging stages of the truancy problem (Rohrman, D., 1997). The first step in the program was for the student and parent to attend an informational group meeting at the school once the student had accumulated three absences. This group provided information about state

compulsory laws and the legal consequences associated with truancy. If the student's attendance did not improve, they were referred to the School Attendance Review Team (SART), which included student, parent, counselor and school social worker. This team collaborated to design an attendance contract that could include counseling sessions and was to be signed by the student and parent (Rohrman, D., 1997). If attendance still did not improve, step three was filing a truancy petition in juvenile court.

According to the TIP year-end report for 2000-2001 petitions filed in juvenile court had decreased by 47% since 1999 (Rohrman, D., 1997). The number of students missing 15 days of school or more decreased from 73% to 42% in grades nine through twelve. Also during the 2000-2001 school year 2,192 students were referred to TIP and only 668 received SART hearings and only 309 were referred to juvenile court (Rohrman, D., 1997).

The school system in Huntsville Alabama (Stephens, 2004) implemented new procedures for dealing with truancy. During the warning phase of this intervention parents could expect a call or note from a teacher or principal when a student had obtained three unexcused absences. At five unexcused absences, phase two, parents would get an invitation to Early Warning, which was a weekly hour-long lecture in district court. Parents learned the consequences of continued truancy from a district judge and met with a school social worker. Guest speakers addressed the parents and gave them sound advice on ways to interact with their children to keep them in school. Phase three began when a student had accumulated ten unexcused absences. At this time, the school system would refer the case to the district attorney for prosecution. In most

cases parents received a fine plus two years of probation. The money that was collected would be awarded to the school system.

Alternative Court Sanction Programs were implemented to assist truants at high risk of detention and placement for failure to comply with judges' orders to attend school after a court petition had been filed. The Truancy Intervention Project has been operating in Atlanta, GA since 1991 and serves children who have been referred to juvenile court for excessive absences (Walls, C., 2003). Once the court received the petition, a probation officer would locate a volunteer mentor/attorney who was willing to handle the case. This TIP volunteer would contact the student and family to establish a connection. At this time the TIP volunteer would begin acting in a supervisory and supportive role to the student to help them to identify barriers to attending school. Evaluations of the TIP reported a 70% success rate of keeping would-be dropouts in school. Since 1992 nearly 2,000 children have been placed in the project and 75% have not had subsequent contacts with the court system (Walls, C., 2003).

### Juvenile Court Intervention

All truancy intervention programs have a common goal. That goal is to eliminate truancy and improve attendance for the student and the juvenile justice system has increasingly been used as a final stop for intervening in these cases (Baker et al., 2001). School social workers are responsible for monitoring student's attendance and are charged with filing a petition with juvenile court when a student is in violation of school attendance regulations. Before this petition could be filed the social worker must have exhausted all resources in an effort to return the student to school. Corville-Smith, Ryan,

Adams, and Dalicandro (1998) outline services that the school social worker should provide to the family prior to filing the court petition:

1. Function as a child advocate to promote good school attendance for the student.
2. Consult with all school personnel to encourage early identification of students with a pattern of irregular or poor attendance.
3. Conference with students and parents to identify factors and or problems at school and home that may cause or contribute to poor attendance.
4. Inform students and parents of their individual and collective responsibility in regard to compulsory school attendance laws.
5. Identify personnel and programs within the school that can provide additional support for students (psychological and guidance counseling services).
6. Monitor the student's attendance on a weekly basis.

Corville-Smith, et al., (1998) also outline the social workers role after a truancy petition has been heard in juvenile court and the student has been placed on supervision as:

1. Maintain contact with the student, parent and appropriate school personnel to monitor school attendance.
2. Collaborate with probation officers to insure effective supervision of the court order as it pertains to the student's school attendance.

Following a court hearing the truant student has the school social worker, a probation officer and a TIP volunteer all working together to help to keep them in school. Court intervention is said to be effective because the students who are subjected to appear in

court are faced with immediate consequences if they are noncompliant with the court orders (Atlanta Model, 2002). Some of the consequences for first time offenders include probation, jail time and even fines while habitual truant students are faced with suspension of driver license, increased fines, order to participate in counseling and work programs, community service, home detention, revocation of student's work permit and a curfew.

From 1994 through 1998 sixteen school districts in Tulsa County, Oklahoma utilized various approaches to combat truancy and found that the most successful method was taking truants and their parents to court (Dekalb, 1999). During this time, 600 cases were prosecuted resulting in over 300 convictions in which the parent was fined. Since 1994, 72% of Tulsa County truants have returned to school after receiving the first truancy court order letter, which notified them that they would have to appear in court. The school district has also witnessed a 45% reduction in the school dropout rate which they attribute their truancy efforts (Truancy, 1998).

### Limitations of the Literature

The limitations of previous research as related to this study will be discussed. Truancy is a term with several definitions and this definition can vary from state to state making it difficult to generalize the meaning for all school systems. Each state has its own set of laws and regulations for handling truancy and each states Compulsory Attendance Law, which mandates school attendance, is also different. Each school system in the state of Georgia is required to collect and report their absenteeism, as these statistics are not collected on a statewide level. Other states have more clearly defined

truancy and have their absenteeism data collected on a statewide level. The differences in the way the statistics are collected and reported make it increasingly difficult to generalize about truancy nationally. Also, these statistics were a critical piece of this study but were troublesome to locate and complicated to interpret. Another limitation to the literature was the lack of reference to information about why truancy decreased. There was no mention if the students' perception of an education changed, if the students were scared of going to court and facing jail time or if the parents were responsible for getting the students back into school. Another limitation to the literature is the lack of empirical studies that disclosed pertinent information about the study such as precise location and sample size. This information is needed to facilitate the understanding of statistics and to make generalizations about similar populations. Research also failed to mention any factors associated with the race of the truant student.

Future studies could seek to observe populations using similar definitions and collection procedures of truancy. Also, these studies could take a more in-depth look into the reasons for the decrease in truancy and be carried out longitudinally, as these studies were scarce.

A strength found within the literature is that the term truancy was clearly defined in each state. Another strength is that the literature is saturated with various methods of dealing with truancy and the pros and cons of the interventions is given. The literature also gives special attention to some of the reasons why students are truant, which will be useful in future interventions aiming at the early prevention of truancy.

### Conceptual Framework

To facilitate an understanding of court intervention on truancy among middle school students, it is useful to refer to B.F. Skinner's theory of Operant Conditioning. This theory is based upon the idea that learning is a function of change in overt behavior (Hiutt, W., Hummel, J., 1997). Changes in behavior are the result of an individual's response to events or stimuli that occur in the environment and the response produces a consequence. When a particular stimulus-response pattern is reinforced (rewarded) the individual is conditioned to respond. According to Hiutt and Hummell, reinforcement is the key element in Skinner's theory and a reinforcer is anything that strengthens the desired response. In negative reinforcement, after the response, the negative reinforcer is removed which increases the frequency of the response and in positive reinforcement, a positive reinforcer is added after a response which increases the frequency of the response (Huitt & Hummell, 1997).

In relation to truancy, the stimulus is juvenile court intervention, the response is the students attendance pattern and the consequence is either praise or criticism. For example, if a student was petitioned to juvenile court (stimulus) and the student's attendance decreased (response) then a negative reinforcer would be removed and these would be privileges such as spending time out with friends and revoking drivers license. On the other hand, as referenced in the literature review but not researched in this study, if his or her attendance increased then a positive reinforcer would be added such as verbal praise, formal recognition, prizes, and parties which would increase the frequency of the students attendance.



It is expected that following juvenile court intervention that the student's attendance will improve, thus eliminating truancy.

#### Research Question and Hypothesis

The research question is:

Will juvenile court intervention decrease truancy among middle school students?

The Hypothesis for this study is:

HO: Juvenile court intervention will decrease truancy among middle school students.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides an explanation of the methods used to conduct the study. It includes a discussion of the design, site, setting and sample, data collection and analysis procedures.

#### Design

To carry out this descriptive study, a non-experimental design format of a one-group pretest-posttest design was used, which is notated by OXO. The first O represents the students' attendance before they were petitioned to court. X represents the intervention, which is juvenile court, and the last O represents students' attendance following the intervention.

The internal validity of the research design may have been threatened by the affect that other variables may have had on the participants' attendance. In addition, there was not a control group to compare the sample results.

#### Site

The site for this study was a public middle school in Atlanta, Georgia. The school is a part of the Atlanta Public School system and has an enrollment of 475

students. This school was selected because of the abundance of juvenile court petitions filed.

### Setting and Sample

The setting for this study was in the school social work office at Joseph Emerson Brown Middle School. The school social worker was responsible for monitoring students' attendance and maintaining their records in confidential files in this office. The social worker references these attendance files when making referrals to juvenile court due to a student violating the Georgia Compulsory School Attendance Law. The school social worker, who provided supervision for this procedure, identified and developed a list of students in grades six, seven and eight who had been petitioned to juvenile court for truancy during the 2001-2002 or 2003-2004 school year. From this list, 30 records were selected from storage. This method utilized convenience sampling, which involved selecting participants from the population on the basis of availability and accessibility and the procedure took place over a two-week period. No limitations, other than having been petitioned to court, were set and a sample of 30 was desired.

### Data Collection

The data for this study were collected using an 11-item truancy instrument (TI). This instrument facilitated the collection of demographic information as well as attendance records data before and after juvenile court intervention in an open and closed-ended format. The dependent variable is truancy and the independent variable is juvenile court intervention.

To ensure the reliability of data collection, the school social worker and the researcher completed two of the truancy instruments for the same two students and compared the findings. Consistent information was found for both students. The construct validity may have been affected by the researchers perceived notion about what the results would show. To control for this threat, the researcher discussed biases with the school social worker and utilized extreme caution while transposing the necessary information from the student's record to the instrument.

The external validity may have been threatened by the commonalities among students. These commonalities could have been things such as their age; grade level and being friends that would make it difficult to assume that the sample was representative of other cases that were not studied.

One major limitation to collecting data in this manner is that the extent to which the sample is representative of the population being studied is unknown. However, this method of sampling is appropriate.

#### Instrumentation

The data for this study were collected using an instrument developed by the researcher. Questions 1-4 capture demographic information while questions 5-6 obtain information relating to court dates. Questions 7 and 8 record attendance before and after the court appearance and questions 9-11 document attendance 60, 90, and 120 days following the court appearance and returning to school.

### Data Analysis

This study explored juvenile court intervention as an avenue for reducing truancy among middle school students. The level of measure for the independent variable, court intervention, was ratio and the level of measure for the dependent variable, truancy, was interval.

The research hypothesis states that juvenile court intervention will reduce truancy among students who were petitioned to court. While the null hypothesis states that juvenile court intervention will have no effect on students who were petitioned to court.

The statistical test, the One Sample T-test, was used to test the hypothesis. This test was chosen because this study employs only one sample and this test has the ability to detect the reliability of the studies measure. The One Sample T-test is also used to determine whether a sample is sufficiently representative of its population in relation to the variables.

All data analysis for this study was completed using a student version of the statistical package SPSS. The reliability coefficient for the measure was .7470, which implies that the measure was reliable. Frequencies and descriptive statistics were also used to analyze demographic information. The hypothesis was tested using the attendance information obtained from the time before the student was petitioned to court and 60 days, 90 days, and 120 days following the court intervention. If student attendance improved, it was concluded that the court intervention was successful. If the student's attendance decreased or no change was found, it was concluded that the court intervention was unsuccessful or had no effect.

A detailed discussion of the methodological procedures used to carry out the study were presented in this chapter. Reliability and validity threats that posed as issues that could have possibly interfered with the study were also covered. The following chapter will detail the study's results and findings.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

The findings of this study will be discussed in this chapter. Demographic characteristics of the participants were described as well as absences before attending juvenile court, absences 60 days following court, absences 90 days following court, and absences 120 days following court.

#### Demographics

This study consisted of 30 participants selected from a public middle school in Atlanta, Georgia. The students' demographic information, which consisted of gender, race, age and grade level was recorded without referencing names or any identifying information regarding respondents to assure anonymity. Table 1 reveals that the sample included 16 males (14 African Americans; 1 Bi-Racial; 1 Caucasian) and 14 females (11 African Americans; 2 Hispanics; 1 Bi-Racial). Figure 1 shows that 47 percent of the respondents were female and 53 percent were male.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics (n=30)

Race	Gender		Grade			Age				
	Male	Female	6	7	8	11	12	13	14	15
African American	14	11	7	12	6	2	6	10	5	2
Caucasian	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0
Hispanic	0	2	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	0
Bi-Racial	1	1	2	0	0	0	2	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>2</b>



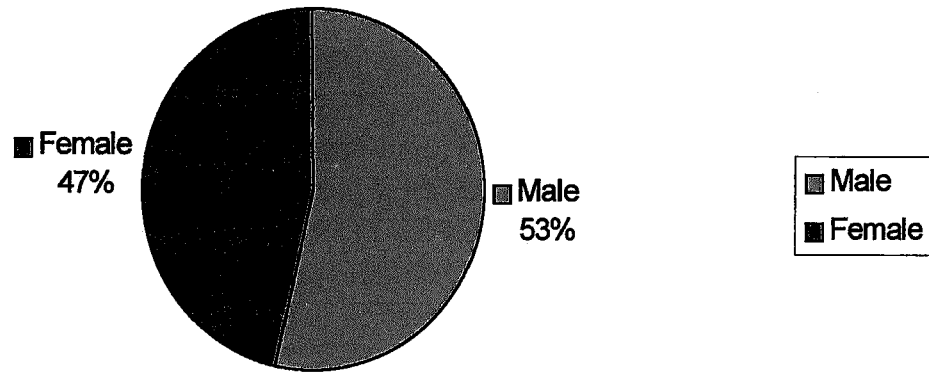


Figure 1. Gender of Participants

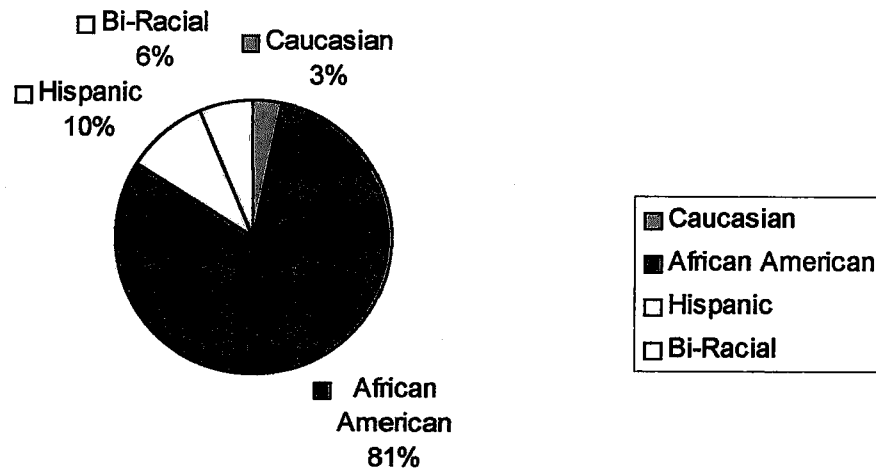


Figure 2. Race/Ethnicity of Participants

The school at which this study was conducted is a predominately African-American student body. The school uses the term race to describe the background of its students. For the purpose of this study, race and ethnicity were used interchangeably. As shown in Figure 2, percentages were used to analyze the ethnic composition of the sample. The analysis revealed that African Americans comprised the largest group of participants in the study with 81%. Hispanics were the second largest group with 10%, while biracial students followed with 6% and Caucasians with 3%.

### Absences

The participants' absences were observed and recorded at four different time periods as follows: (a) absences before attending juvenile court, (b) absences 60-days after court intervention, (c) absences 90-days after court intervention, and (d) absences 120-days after court intervention.

#### Absences Before Attending Juvenile Court

An analysis was conducted of the number of days students were absent before attending juvenile court and is presented in Figure 3. Before attending juvenile court for truancy, 20% of the participants were absent between 6 and 10 days, and 40% were absent between 11 and 15 days and 23% between 16 and 20 days. Only 17% of the participants were absent from school more than 20 days before going to court. During school years 2002-2003 and 2003-2004, the middle school under study had established a policy that required homeroom teachers to refer all students to the school social worker when they had accumulated three absences. The school social worker would then

intervene and a student would only be petitioned to juvenile court once they acquired 10 absences. Court dates were assigned by the court system and usually scheduled within 30 days from the date which the court received the petition. During this time students still have the opportunity to miss days of school, which may account for the high number of school days missed before a student attends court.

#### Absences 60-Days After Juvenile Court Intervention

Student records were reviewed 60-days following court intervention and the number of absences was noted and the results are shown in Figure 4. Of the 30 participants, 28 or 93% were absent between 0 and 5 days and 2 or 7% of the participants were absent between 6 and 10 days. None of the 30 participants were absent for more than 10 days when the records were checked 60-days following court intervention.

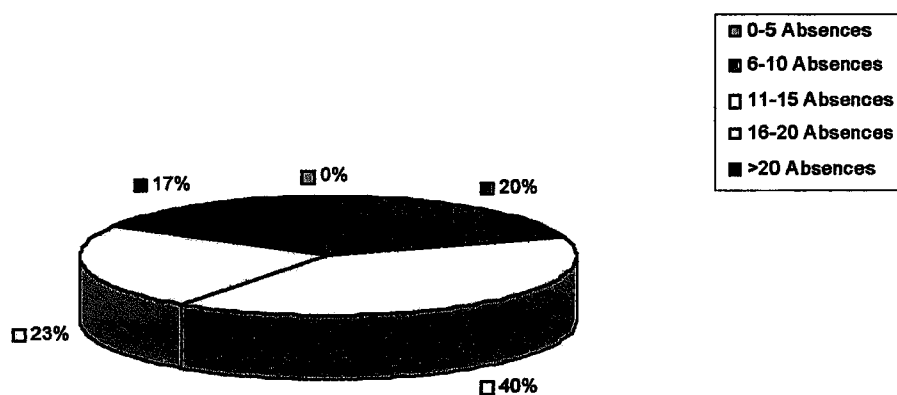


Figure 3. Number of Absences Before Attending Juvenile Court

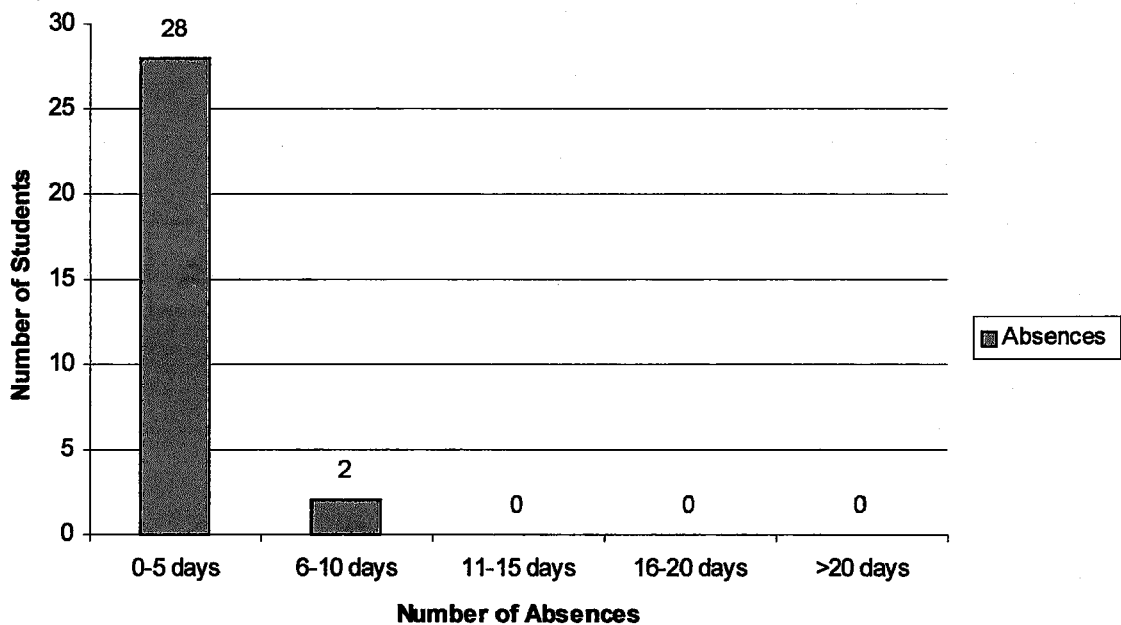


Figure 4. Number of Absences 60 Days After Attending Juvenile Court

#### Absences 90-Days After Juvenile Court Intervention

The students attendance records were tabulated to determine the number of absences from school 90-days after the court intervention. The results are shown in Figure 5 and reveals that of the 30 participants, more than half (17 students or 57%) were absent between 0 and 5 days. Eleven participants or 37% missed between 6 and 10 days and 2 or 6% missed between 11 and 15 days of school 90 days following court intervention. Ninety days following court intervention, none of the students missed more than 15 days of school.

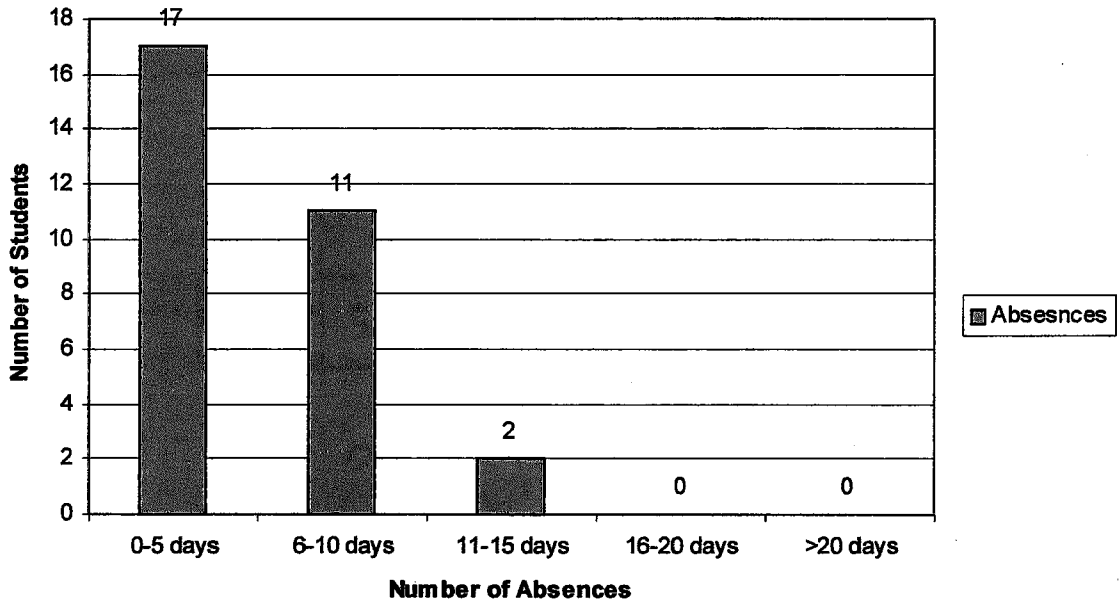


Figure 5. Number of Absences 90 Days After Attending Juvenile Court

#### Absences 120-Days After Juvenile Court Intervention

One hundred and twenty days after juvenile court intervention, student records were reviewed a final time and the results are shown in Figure 6. The intervals between 0 and 5 and between 11 and 15 had the same number of participants. Each had 6 participants or 20% for a total of 40% of the participants. Fourteen participants or 47% had between 6 and 10 absences and 4 or 13% had between 16 and 20 absences 120 days following court intervention. One hundred and twenty days was the longest period of time that records were review following court intervention and none of the students had more than 20 absences.

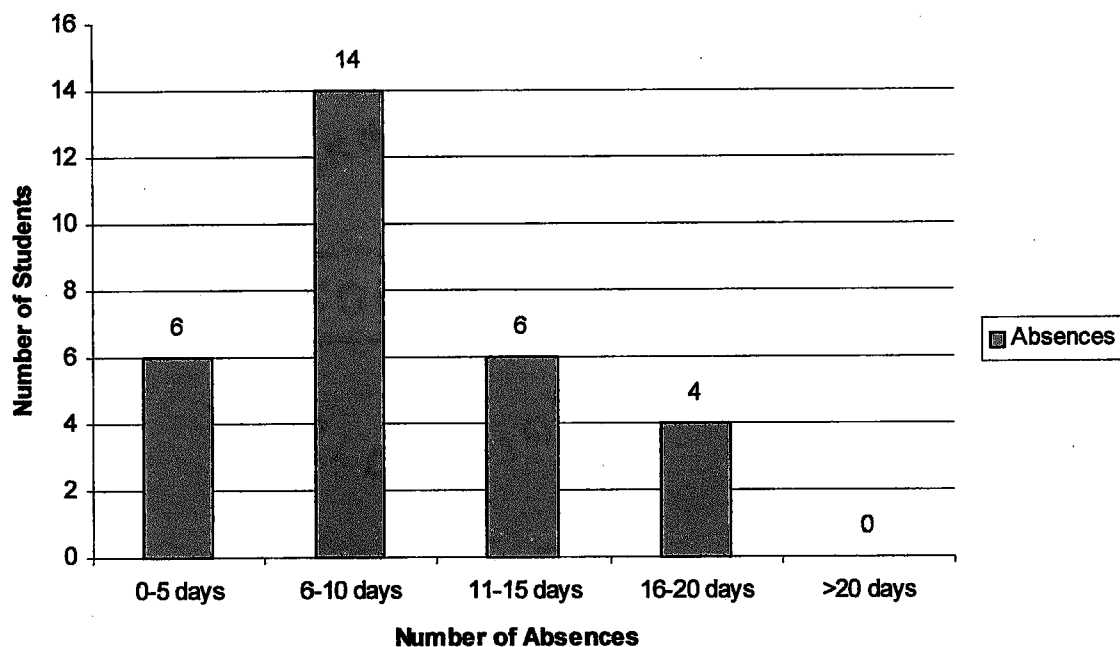


Figure 6. Number of Absences 120 Days After Attending Juvenile Court

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine if juvenile court intervention would reduce truancy among middle school students whose ages ranged from 11 to 14 years old. It was expected that juvenile court intervention would reduce absences for students with chronic attendance problems and who were referred to the court system for intervention. The results of this study showed that several of the students continued to accrue absences after going to court and that their attendance patterns displayed little change from what they were before the intervention. These results indicate that there was no significant

correlation between juvenile court intervention and the reduction of absences. For the 60 and 90-day attendance review the majority of the students fell between 0 and 5 absences with 93% and 57% respectively. For the 120-day attendance review the absences were spread out and did not significantly decrease, however none of the students missed more than 20 days of school. These finding suggest that there may be a correlation between juvenile court intervention and the number of days of school a student decides to miss, since no absences reached 20.

A detailed discussion of the analyzed results of the data collected in this study was presented in this chapter. Although there was no significant relationships presented in the analysis of the posttest data, results did show that there may be some relationship between juvenile court intervention and the students decision to miss a certain number of days from school.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

This chapter summarizes the findings of this study and makes a comparison to previously conducted research in the area of truancy. Limitations of the study are discussed along with areas of truancy that need further investigation.

The purpose of this study was to determine if juvenile court intervention would reduce truancy among middle school students whose ages ranged from 11 to 14 years old. Although the results of the study did not show a significant reduction in student absences after juvenile court intervention they presented a stage for further research in the area. The study provides avenues that social work practitioners along with other professionals working with truant students in a middle school setting may want to explore.

Literature reviewed in preparation for this study suggested that further research was needed to discover which interventions are successful in combating truancy and what factors can be attributed to the decrease in absences. The findings of data obtained in this study supported the literature in suggesting that there is a need for further investigation.

The Atlanta Model, 2002 states that court intervention is said to be effective because the students who are subjected to appear in court are faced with immediate consequences if they are noncompliant with the court orders. However, the data found by this study implies that juvenile court intervention may have adverse effects on truancy and



attendance due to the slight increase in absenteeism and no significant change being found at 60, 90 and 120 days following intervention.

As mentioned previously in the conceptual framework the theory of operant conditioning states that behaviors can either be strengthened or weakened by the consequences enforced upon them and when a particular stimulus-response pattern is reinforced or rewarded the individual is conditioned to respond (Huitt & Hummel, 1997). The juvenile court system uses punishment, a process of operant conditioning, to get desired responses from truancy offenders. The results from this study have shown that punishment may not have worked as it was intended to reduce truancy. It has resulted in weakening the attendance patterns of truant students rather than strengthening them.

The results from the study have posed several questions that are relevant in the area of truancy, and they are as follows: Is petitioning students with chronic attendance problems to juvenile court and assigning fines, jail time and probation for punishment a successful way to combat truancy? A second question is should truancy cases be managed on an individual basis, giving the school social worker the flexibility to develop intervention strategies that are specific to the unique student. Lastly, it would be helpful to know some of the reasons that truant students are absent from school.

### Limitations of the Study

A limitation of this research study was the availability of data. The researcher was interested in reviewing closed files from students who had been petitioned to juvenile court for truancy. These files were requested because they contained attendance

information prior to attending to court and following court. It was a difficult task for the school social worker to recall which files were closed, which files contained all of the necessary information and to locate the files.

Another limitation to the study was the lack of face to face interviews with the participants. An interview would have allowed for the students to discuss their attendance patterns and give answers to the question of why they were absent from school. It cannot be determined from the data collected if the slight change in attendance was attributed to the juvenile court intervention or to outside factors that were not variables in this study.

The design of this study does not include the means for a longitudinal study. Without a longitudinal study it is impossible to access the long-term effects of the juvenile court system on truancy. A longitudinal study is needed to draw accurate conclusions about the effects of juvenile court intervention on truancy over a period of time. The internal validity of this design may have been threatened because other variables, that were not included in this study, may have contributed to the change in the students attendance.

## CHAPTER VI

### IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

The purpose of this study was to determine if juvenile court intervention would reduce truancy among middle school students whose ages ranged from 11 to 14 years old. Although the results of this study were not definitive and did not prove the hypothesis, they presented a platform for further research in the area of truancy. It provides social work practitioners, as well as others working in the helping profession with children, useful information that they would need to explore other avenues in addressing truancy prevention and elimination.

The problem of truancy continues to exist in numerous schools throughout the United States, affecting students, teachers, families and their communities (Wyatt, 2003). Proactive research is needed in this area to create programs and interventions that are preventative in nature as well as programs that will help to eliminate truancy. A reduction in truancy will enable students to be in school more, therefore increasing their learning potential and possibly raising test scores for their school.

Placing more of an emphasis on the external factors that may cause a student to become truant will aid in developing policies, programs and strategies that can stop truancy before it has a chance to manifest. Research into this area will help the school

social worker better serve the students, parents, teachers and the community who are affected by truancy by developing individualized case plans.

## **APPENDICES**

## APPENDIX A

## Demographic and Truancy Questionnaire

- |     |   |           |                  |       |                    |
|-----|---|-----------|------------------|-------|--------------------|
| 1.  | What is the student's gender?   | Male      | Female           |       |                    |
| 2.  | What is the student's race  | Caucasian | African American |       |                    |
|     |   | Hispanic  | Bi-Racial        | Asian |                    |
| 3.  | What is the student's age?  | 11        | 12               | 13    | 14 15              |
| 4.  | What is the student's grade level?                                    | 6         | 7                | 8     |                    |
| 5.  | When did the school social worker file the truancy petition           | <hr/>     |                  |       |                    |
| 6.  | What date did the student attend juvenile court for truancy           | <hr/>     |                  |       |                    |
| 7.  | How many absences did the student have BEFORE attending court         | 1-5       | 6-10             | 11-15 | 16-20 more than 20 |
| 8.  | How many absences did the student have AFTER attending court          | 1-5       | 6-10             | 11-15 | 16-20 more than 20 |
| 9.  | How many absences did the student have 60-days after attending court  | 1-5       | 6-10             | 11-15 | 16-20 more than 20 |
| 10. | How many absences did the student have 90-days after attending court  | 1-5       | 6-10             | 11-15 | 16-20 more than 20 |
| 11. | How many absences did the student have 120-days after attending court | 1-5       | 6-10             | 11-15 | 16-20 more than 20 |

## APPENDIX B

## Research Site Approval Letter

**ATLANTA PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

January 27, 2005

RESEARCH, PLANNING AND ACCOUNTABILITY  
130 TRINITY AVENUE, S.W.  
7TH FLOOR  
ATLANTA, GEORGIA 30303-3624

404-802-2780  
404-802-1719 FAX

*Our Focus... Student Success*

Ms. Valerie Simpson  
2383 Akers Mill Road, #C8  
Atlanta, Georgia 30339

Dear Ms. Simpson:

Your revised request to conduct research within the Atlanta Public Schools (APS) was reviewed by the Research Screening Committee in accordance with the guidelines. Your research study entitled "A Descriptive Study of the Outcome of Juvenile Court Intervention on Truancy Among Middle School Students" was approved under the following conditions:

1. Your study is confined in APS to Brown Middle School. Principals have the final approval on whether research studies are conducted in their schools. You must obtain the approval of the principal, Dr. Sharon Riley Ordu, prior to beginning your research study. If Dr. Ordu does not approve of your research study or does not believe it is in the best interest of the school to participate, your request is denied.
2. Your research design involves working with the social worker at the school on a project related to preventing truancy. You plan to examine and analyze attendance data for a selected sample of sixty students. You are currently serving as a social worker intern at Parkside Elementary School.
3. No students will be directly involved in your research study.
4. You cannot be allowed access to personally identifiable individual student data. You can be provided with student data only in blind or aggregate format.
5. Activities related to your research study must not interfere with the ongoing instructional program in the classrooms or with the state and local testing programs.
6. The confidentiality of students, teachers, other APS staff members, the schools, and the school system must be ensured. Pseudonyms for people and the schools, as well as references to APS as "a large urban school system," are required in the title and text of your final report before publication or presentation outside of APS.
7. Teachers and other APS employees can participate in or assist with your research study only on a voluntary basis.
8. The data collection phase of your research study must be completed by the end of the 2005 calendar year.
9. If changes are made in the research design or in the instruments used, you must notify the Department of Research, Planning, and Accountability prior to beginning your study.

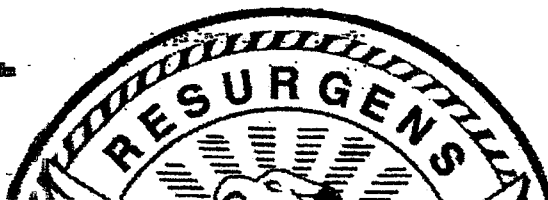
This letter serves as official notification of the approval of the revisions to your proposed research study, pending the above conditions. Remember that a copy of the results of your completed study must be submitted to the Department of Research, Planning, and Accountability. Please contact me at (404) 802-2708 or [neumons@atlanta.k12.ga.us](mailto:neumons@atlanta.k12.ga.us) if I can be of further assistance.

Sincerely,

Nancy J. Neumons, Ph.D.  
Research Associate

EDH:dd -#171-2

cc: Mr. Lester McKee  
Dr. Sharon Riley Ordu



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